

Grave secrets revealed

Genealogy blogs are buzzing with the news that the records from St Pancras and Islington – London’s oldest and largest cemetery – are now available at deceasedonline.com. Sarah Warwick finds out more...

The Hardy Tree, in St Pancras Churchyard, London

By the middle of the 19th century, enough was enough for London’s churchyards. Booming immigration to the city had put an enormous strain on resources, and it wasn’t just living space that was scarce but space for the dead too.

The inherent right of every parishioner to be buried in the consecrated ground of their local church was interfering with the rights of their still-living neighbours to breathe clean air, without the stench of death or the risk of disease. Some of the parish churchyards had been in daily use for centuries, with hundreds of bodies per square metre. Or even thousands – in the early 1840s, the churchyard of St Martin-in-the-Fields, which was only 200 sq ft (60m²), was estimated to contain the remains of between 60,000-70,000 people.

This didn’t just mean that these grounds – swollen with bodies – bulged higher than the streets around them, or that funeral services were often jarred by the sight of old bones tumbling into a loved one’s resting place. It also had a horrendous effect on parishioners, who spent their lives with the foul stench of decaying bodies, or who suffered ill-effects from corpse-related diseases.

A columnist in the *London and Sporting Chronicle*, wrote on 9 September 1838,

begging for “legislative interference” in the problem of churchyard overcrowding: “The population of London is exposed to the pestilent miasma of our burial grounds, situated as they are in the very midst of the most densely crowded neighbourhoods, is calculated to excite the most painful apprehensions for the public safety.” He pointed to a recent case where a gravedigger was killed by the noxious fumes as he reopened a grave.

Dangerous epidemic

Dr John Simon’s City Medical Reports, written a decade later, went even further in its descriptions of the horrors, and the danger: “The atmosphere in which epidemic and infectious diseases most readily diffuse their poison and multiply their victims is one in which organic matters are undergoing decomposition. Whether the matter passing into decay be dead dogs floated in a sewer, stinking fish thrown overboard in Billingsgate dock, or remains of human corpses undergoing

their last chemical changes in consecrated earth, the previous history of the decomposed material is of no moment whatever.”

He finished his report by begging for a new system of burial: “Under the present arrangements every dead body buried within our walls receives its accommodation at the expense of the living, and to their great detriment.” It was clear that something had to be done, and there weren’t many options. Privately owned burial grounds did exist before this date, but they were not the norm, and cremation was illegal until the 1880s.

Parishioners suffered ill-effects from corpse-related diseases

Eventually a pressure group, the National Society for the Abolition of Burial in Towns, was founded in 1845, and they pushed first for the Cemeteries Clauses Act (made law in 1847) and then the Burial Act of 1852, which enforced the closing of the urban churchyards and the creation of municipal graveyards. ⇨

Notable burials

Some of the famous names you can find buried at Islington and St Pancras...

Percival Spencer 1864-1913

A famous hot-air balloonist, and the first man to successfully make a parachute jump from a balloon.

Ken 'Snakehips' Johnson 1914-1941

Britain's first Black swing bandleader, who was killed with his band as they played at the Café de Paris.

John Hickey, died 1896

Survivor of the Light Brigade's famous charge. A memorial was erected to him by admirers, including Jerome K Jerome.

Ford Madox-Brown 1821-1893

English painter and contemporary of William Morris, known for his Pre-Raphaelite style.

Cora Crippen 1875-1910

The notorious Dr Crippen's wife, whose real name was Kunigunde Mackamotski, who he famously murdered.

Henry Croft 1862-1930

Croft was the first-ever pearly king of the East End; his funeral was attended by 400 of his pearly subjects.

Two parishes in central London that had been badly affected by the overcrowding, Islington and St Pancras, were the first to purchase land for their cemeteries. Shortly after the Act was made law, the St Pancras Burial Board bought 88 acres of farmland on Finchley Common and established the first publicly owned cemetery in London. It was consecrated and put into use in 1854.

Spreading out

Another 94 acres were added in 1877 – making St Pancras and Islington Cemetery the biggest in London – although in reality it is still officially two burial grounds, divided up between the deceased citizens of Islington and Camden. By 1900 there were 365,000 people buried in the graveyard; by the year 2000 there were more than a million.



Cora Crippen, who was murdered by her husband, Dr John Crippen

A handful of these people were famous in their day, including the remains of murder victim, Cora Crippen, and hot-air balloonist Percival Spencer (see box on the left), and there are also a number of casualties from both wars. According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, there are 299 First World War commemorations in St Pancras Cemetery, and 207 from the Second World War. Some of the graves are notable for their architecture or hailed as artistically pleasing,



Gravestones in St Pancras' Old Church cemetery, Camden

including the Mond mausoleum and crypt (the grave of industrialist, Ludwig Mond), near the centre of the cemetery, which the *London Cemeteries Gazetteer* describes as: "the finest classical building in any of the London cemeteries".

Some of the graves tell a story, too. Like that of William French, which is guarded by a dog whose life he saved. Or Letizia Melisi, whose death by London motor cab is relived in a dramatic frieze on her mausoleum.

One of the main sights of the cemetery is the Hardy Tree – a tree surrounded with many gravestones, and named after Thomas Hardy. Before becoming a novelist, Hardy worked for the Midland Railway and was given the unenviable task of overseeing the exhumation and reburial of many of the bodies in the cemetery to make way for the railway's expansion. More recently, other bodies were moved to make way for the Channel Tunnel rail link. ■

A BURIAL REGISTER

CORA CRIPPEN was born in America and aspired to be a music hall actress. She married Dr Hawley Crippen and came to England with him in 1900. She is rumoured to have been promiscuous and unfaithful, but she surely didn't deserve the end that Dr Crippen gave her – being poisoned and then cut up into several pieces. Only her torso was ever found.

ROMAN CATHOLIC GROUND.

No. of Register.	NAME	ABODE	When Buried.	Age	By whom the Ceremony was performed.	No. of Grave.	Class.	Name of Undertaker.	Address.
237892	Margaret Harvey	25 Long Street, Ruislip	Sept. 27	27	J. Powell	326	3	Barkley	Islington
237891	Elizabeth Quaden					326	3	A. Trause	
237907	Ellen Perry				Clayton	327	3	Cooking	
237908	Ellen Kelly					328	3	Burridge	
237909	Antonia Costa	53 Long Street, Ruislip		33		327	3	A. Trause	Islington
237928		Village	Oct. 5	27		324	3	Hell	K.T.
237929				67		329	3	W. Burtell	Islington
237906			Oct. 6	51		324	3		
237915	Alfred Gregory Savage	7 Gee Street, Faversham	Oct. 8	11		56	3		
237969	Katherine Susan Payne	17 Clarendon Square, Ruislip		111		329	3		
237977	Isabella Perry	4 Ingoche Road, Ruislip	Oct. 10	5		56	3	Reape	Islington
237986	Remains of Cora Crippen	29 Killditch Crescent, Islington	Oct. 11	34	J. Powell	40	1	Leventon	C.T.

Abode
This shows where the deceased lived while alive. In Cora's case this isn't so important, as her address is well-documented, but for a family member it could be crucial.

Number of grave
This is probably the most useful piece of information. From this number you should be able to find the right area on a cemetery map (which you can download from islington.gov.uk/environment/cemeteries) or contact the cemetery officials for more information.

Denomination
Cemeteries were generally split into denominational sections, with some areas saved for Catholics and some for nonconformists. This page indicates that Cora was a Catholic.

Age
This is very useful as it could help to find an ancestor's date of birth, although it's important to remember that those reporting deaths could be vague about age so these dates might not be accurate.

Step-by-step guide to finding a burial online



1 Register with deceasedonline.com

Approximately 70 per cent of the St Pancras and Islington burial records are now available on deceasedonline.com. To access them you must first register your details on the Home Page. You can then buy credits for pay-per-view, at £1 for 10, with a minimum initial purchase of 30.

2 Enter your ancestor's details

Then perform a search by entering the person's name and a range of years. The website will return a list of possible people, each with a name, burial or cremation date (and sometimes date of death) and where the burial was recorded.



3 View the resulting registers

Click on the word 'view' to see an image of a burial or cremation register, either a scan of a register or a transcription. If there are other documents relating to the person of interest you can view these as well for additional credits. Most records, including burial or cremation register scans or grave details, cost 15 credits to view, although images or maps of graves (if available) cost 20 and 50 credits respectively.